Aaron Sopher Papers 1938-1941
MS24

Finding aid prepared by Anita Carrico

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Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Enoch Pratt Free Library Special Collections
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Summary Information

Repository	Enoch Pratt Free Library Special Collections
Title	Aaron Sopher Collection
Date	1938-1941
Extent	2.0 Linear feet 3 boxes
Language	English
Abstract	The Aaron Sopher Collection (1938-1941) largely consists of pen and ink drawings and watercolors by the onetime Maryland Institute of Fine and Applied Arts (now MICA) student and Baltimore Sun illustrator. Sopher's art offers a view of Baltimore and its people in his distictive style and this collection contains a broad mixture of his work depicting the people and places of the city.

Biographical/Historical note

Aaron Sopher was born in East Baltimore, on December 16, 1905, the tenth of thirteen children. His father, Samuel A. Sopher was the son of a Lithuanian immigrant and his mother, Jennie Saperstein was a Russian immigrant. His father owned a small cigar factory and tobacco shop near Baltimore harbor. Aaron's drawing ability might have been inherited from his grandfather, who owned a bookshop and sold Hebrew religious books and was a prominent scribe who hand lettered the Torah for synagogues. (The word sofer means "scribe" in Hebrew.) Sopher attended Maryland Institute of Fine and Applied Arts (now the Maryland Institute, College of Art). While there he trained with institute director Alon Bement who became his mentor; however, when a new director came on board in 1925, he did not award Sopher a diploma because of his frequent absences and lack of discipline. Sopher was a free spirit and wanted to draw people in action. After he left MICA, Sopher made a living by working on free-lance illustration jobs for the Baltimore Sun and his drawings began to appear regularly. In 1927 he received his first large commission from the newspaper to illustrate a story about the Baltimore waterfront. These illustrations were the first to bring him wide recognition.

During a two-year residence in New York from 1929-31, his cartoons regularly appeared in The New Yorker. After the stock market crash of 1929 artists' prospects dimmed and he needed to supplement his income by designing lampshades. While in New York, Sopher's work, such as sketches of workmen, appeared in The New Masses, a leftist publication devoted to social commentary. Other contributors included John Sloan and Reginald Marsh. During the depression, Sopher felt a moral responsibility to portray in a meaningful way, the devastating problems faced by Americans. Throughout his career, his drawings evoked a mood or scene, both humorous and somber of people with universal appeal. His quick, deft lines and apparent spontaneity recall the work of Daumier, Hogarth, and Rowlandson. Aaron Sopher died in Baltimore in 1972.

During his career, Aaron Sopher was supported by Baltimore/Washington regional cultural institutions for his talent, receiving acclaim from The Baltimore Museum of Art, The Peale Museum and the Corcoran Gallery of Art. He was also a personal friend and art advisor to Etta Cone, who with her sister Claribel formed the famous collection of modern art which included Matisse and Picasso. Etta Cone was a patron of Sopher's work, from 1937 through 1949, purchasing 142 of his drawings and watercolors. The book, Aaron Sopher, Satirist of the American Condition by Peter Hastings Falk, was published by the Sound View Press in Madison, Connecticut in conjunction with an exhibition at The Baltimore Museum of Art in 1991.

Scope and Contents note

The Aaron Sopher Collection consists of 137 pen and ink drawings and watercolors produced from 1938-1941. The collection is organized by subject area, media, and intended publication, and is arranged in nine series. Each image has been given a plate number in lieu of a ‘folder’ number. The # after the image title is one which was found on the drawing, probably given by Sopher. Work intended for the “Baltimore Almanac” was probably commissioned by the U.S. Works Projects Administration, Federal Writers’ Project, Maryland, but never published. Other works by Sopher were meant to illustrate the Maryland Guide, but were not used. Additional topics include: the Pimlico watercolors, drawings of the Baltimore Museum of Art as well as a landscape series, and houses and views of Maryland.

Arrangement note

Series I: Pen & Ink and Watercolors, 1938-1940 The series consists of 5 subseries by subject area. Subseries 1, “Hospitalized Child”; Subseries 2, Depictions of lower class people; Subseries 3, Baltimore street scenes; Subseries 4, Depictions of upper class people; Subseries 5, Work and transportation scenes.

Series II: Pen & Ink drawings (3”x3”) for “Maryland Guide Book”. These 13 small drawings were done to illustrate the Maryland Guide Book that was published in 1940 by the WPA, but were not used in it.

Series III: Pen & Ink drawings for “Almanac”. These 42 drawings were done for another project by the WPA, “Baltimore Almanac” but never published. Several of these drawings although having the same title, are different.

Series IV: Pimlico watercolors. Paintings done at the Pimlico racetrack.

Series V: BMA and the 9th Annual Maryland Show, 1941. Drawings of the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Series VI: Images of the woods, 1939. Landscape series.

Series VII: Groups outdoors, 1940. Peopled landscapes.

Series VIII: Buildings. Houses and views in Maryland.

Series IX: Large format. Variety of large format drawings and watercolors.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

Enoch Pratt Free Library Special Collections November, 2006

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Immediate Source of Acquisition note

The only documentation regarding deposit of the collection of drawings and watercolors in the Aaron Sopher Collection is contained on the original box label: “Sopher, Aaron – Works – 137 drawings and water colors by Aaron Sopher. 42 of them are marked “Baltimore Almanac” which was probably projected by the U.S. Works Projects Administration, Federal Writers’ Project, Maryland, but never published. Others are marked as if they had been meant to illustrate the Maryland Guide (which was published in 1940 by the U. S. Works Projects Administration, Federal Writers’ Project, Maryland) but they were not used in it. Most of them have local significance but some are general. There are some duplicates. The collection is on indefinite loan to the library by the U. S. Works Projects Administration. Items are to be kept in the Maryland Department locked case.” The Maryland Department transferred the collection to Special Collections.

Controlled Access Headings

Corporate Name(s)

- Baltimore Almanac.
- Baltimore sun.
- Federal Writer's Project.
- Maryland Institute, College of Art.
- The New Masses.
- United States. Works Progress Administration.

Genre(s)

- Cartoons
- drawings (visual works)
- Illustrations
- Social commentary
- Watercolors

Geographic Name(s)

- Maryland (state)

Personal Name(s)

- Bement, Alon, 1876-1954
- Cone, Claribel, 1864-1929
- Cone, Etta, 1870-1949
- Falk, Peter H.
- Sopher, Aaron, 1905-1972

Subject(s)

- Great Depression
- Satires (Visual works)--1930-1940.

Collection Inventory

Series I: Pen & Ink and Watercolors, 1938-1940	**Box** 1	**Folder** 1-41
Subseries 1: "Hospitalized Child"	**Box** 1	**Folder** 1-2
	Box	**Folder**
Illustration for "The Hospitalized Child and His Family- postoperation, #2", undated pen & ink & wash	1	1
"On the sundeck CMSC – Johns Hopkins Hospital", #104, Undated, pen & ink	1	2
Subseries 2: Depictions of lower class people	**Box** 1	**Folder** 3-15
	Box	**Folder**
"The Flower Sellers", #167, 1939. pen & ink & wash	1	3
"Oriole Cafeteria, Baltimore", #172, 1939. pen & ink	1	4
"Baltimore Cafeteria", #177, 1938. pen & ink	1	5
"Street Scene, no. 2", #277, undated, pen & ink & wash	1	6
"Christmas Trees", #181, 1939. pen & ink & watercolor	1	7
"Relief Case", #171, 1939. pen & ink	1	8

“Untitled (somber, seated man)”, 1941. pen & ink & wash	1	9
“Street Car”, #153, 1939. pen & ink	1	10
“Profile”, #257, 1940. pen & ink & wash	1	11
“Colored Lady”, #138, undated, pen & ink & wash	1	12
“Figure”, #178, undated pen & ink	1	13
“Refugees” #28, #180, undated, oil paint on canvas board	1	14
“Bomb’s Victim” #179, 1939. pen & ink & paint	1	15
Subseries 3: Baltimore street scenes	**Box** 1	**Folder** 16-24
	Box	**Folder**
“St. James Court, Baltimore” #159, undated pen & ink & color wash	1	16
“Night Scene no. 3”, #126, undated pen & ink & color wash	1	17
“Negro Section”, #221, undated, pen & ink & wash	1	18
“High Street, Baltimore”, #128, 1938. pen & ink & wash	1	19
“View from Gough St. and Central Ave., Baltimore”, #158, undated pen & ink & wash	1	20

“Looking West on Fayette Street, Baltimore”, #139 (no. 9), 1938. pen & ink & wash	1	21
“South Sharp Street, Baltimore”, #157, 1939. pen & ink & wash	1	22
“Aliceanna Street, Baltimore”, #149, 1939. pen & ink & Color wash	1	23
“East from Recreation Pier, Baltimore”, #154, 1939. pen & ink	1	24
Subseries 4: Depictions of upper class people	**Box** 1	**Folder** 25-32
	Box	**Folder**
“Lunch”, #147, 1938. pen & ink & watercolor	1	25
“New Years Eve, (no. 1), #137, undated pen & ink & wash	1	26
“New Years Eve, (no. 2), #176, undated, pen & ink & wash	1	27
“Sanitary Market”, #165, undated, pen & ink & wash	1	28
“The Three Hats”, #150, undated, pen & ink & watercolor	1	29
“Old Man”, #254, 1940. pen & ink & crayon	1	30
“Light Lunch”, #160, 1939. pen & ink & watercolor	1	31
“Refreshment”, #308, 1940. pen & ink & watercolor	1	32

Subseries 5: Work and transportation scenes	Box 1	Folder 33-41
	Box	**Folder**
(A harvest scene), 1939. pen & ink & crayon	1	33
“Industrial Scene”, 1939. pen & ink & crayon	1	34
“Maryland Indians”, 1939. pen & ink & crayon	1	35
“Conestoga Wagon” – once a feature of the turnpike roads Of Maryland and Pa.”, 1939. pen & ink & crayon	1	36
“Untitled, (loading a B.O. RR car)”, undated, pen & ink	1	37
“Railroad – Transportation”, undated, pen & ink & crayon	1	38
“Fellow Passengers”, #256, undated, pen & ink & watercolor	1	39
“Railroad Station”, #305, 1940. pen & ink & watercolor	1	40
“Overlea Trolley Station, Maryland”, #162, 1939. pen & ink & wash	1	41
Series II: Pen & Ink Drawings (3”x3”) for “Maryland Guide Book”	**Box** 2	**Folder** 42-54
	Box	**Folder**
“Indians"	2	42
"Art"	2	43

"Press"	2	44
"The Shot Tower"	2	45
“Salisbury? Cambridge?”	2	46
“Labor? Industry?”	2	47
“Conestoga Wagon? Transportation?”	2	48
"Agriculture"	2	49
“The State House, Annapolis”	2	50
"Agriculture"	2	51
“Old Limestone Bridge”	2	52
“Industry? Labor?”	2	53
“Cumberland – Railroad York”	2	54
Series III: Pen & Ink Drawings for “Almanac”	**Box** 2	**Folder** 55-96
	Box	**Folder**
p.3 – “February’s Slump”	2	55
p.6 – “The Weather for 1941”	2	56

p.8 – “’Oh-Sha-Na-See’ and the bivalve”	2	57
p.11 – “Maryland beaten biscuits recipe”	2	58
p.14 – “Baltimore Almanac”	2	59
p.14 – “Baltimore Almanac”	2	60
p.18 – “G. Washington and Md hospitality	1	61
p.20 - “Divorce in the Free State”	2	62
p.21 – “March”	2	63
p.21 – “March”	2	64
p.22 – “Harriet Tubman – heroine of Underground Railway”	2	65
p.23 – “March – ‘Skirts that are of springtime hue. March Wind will get fresh with you.’”	2	66
p. 24 “Baltimore Almanac”	2	67
p. 24 “Baltimore Almanac”	2	68
“March – ‘As March marches on and winter wanes, Etc’	2	69

p.26 – “Baltimore Almanac”	2	70
p.26 – “Baltimore Almanac”	2	71
p.27 – “March – ‘It was the Irish not Pat wot scared ‘em Away’”	2	72
p.30 – “The tobacco and Mrs. Beard”	2	73
p.30 – “Forest Rangers of Baltimore”	2	74
p.33 – “April”	2	75
p.33 – “April”	2	76
p.39 – “April”	2	77
p.41 – “April”	2	78
p.44 – “Demeter”	2	79
p.44 – “Demeter”	2	80
p.44 – “Demeter”	2	81
p.46 – “Baltimore Almanac”	2	82
p.51 – “May – ‘When civilization’s blasted out, etc.’”	2	83

p.54 – “hair dye”	2	84
p.56 - “Saint Anthony and the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904”	2	85
p.57 – “June”	2	86
p.57 – “June”	2	87
p.61 – “June – ‘Pigs’ feet’”	2	88
p.61 – “June – ‘Pigs’ feet’”	2	89
p.66 – “Bathing in Jones Falls”	2	90
p.71 – “When the heat is so abominable then we write our Doggerel terrible”	2	91
P. 71-"August"	2	92
p.76 – “August”	2	93
p.94 – “Court trial of a tree”	2	94
“Brooklyn Supreme 3200 lbs. Timonium – biggest horse in The world – 1940”	2	95
“Timonium - the proud owner”	2	96

Series IV: Pimlico watercolors	Box	Folder
	3	97-100
	Box	**Folder**
“At the Track” undated	3	97
“Pimlico, no. 28, 1941	3	98
“Pimlico, no. 26, 1941	3	99
“Pimlico, no. 27, 1941	3	100
Series V: BMA and the 9th Annual Maryland Show	**Box**	**Folder**
	3	101-105
	Box	**Folder**
"untitled"	3	101
“9th Annual Maryland Show”, no. 9, 1941	3	102
“Print Room – Baltimore Museum of Art”, March 1941	3	103
“Thorne Miniature Rooms, BMA”, March 1941	3	104
“Baltimore Museum of Art”, no. 11, March 1941	3	105
Series VI: Images of the woods	3	106-112
	Box	**Folder**
“Double Rock”	3	106

untitled landscape	3	107
untitled landscape, 1939	3	108
“Rocks – Baltimore County, Md.”	3	109
“Woodland Stream, Baltimore County”	3	110
“Fallen Tree”, 1939	3	111
“Woods – Baltimore County, Md.”, 1939	3	112
Series VII: Groups outdoors	**Box** 3	**Folder** 113-118
	Box	**Folder**
“On the Rocks”, 1940	3	113
“Picnic Scene”, 1940	3	114
“Picnic”, 1940	3	115
“Park Band”, 1940	3	116
“Zoo”, 1940	3	117
“Sideshow”	3	118
Series VIII: Buildings	**Box** 3	**Folder** 119-131

	Box	Folder
“View from Maryland Yacht Club, Baltimore”	3	119
“Old House on Greenspring Road, Md”	3	120
“Old House on Greenspring Road, Md.," no. 2	3	121
“Old Farmhouse, Maryland”, 1939	3	122
“Old Graveyard on Belair Road, Baltimore”, 1939	3	123
“Backyard – Overlea, Md.”, 1938	3	124
“Old House – Baltimore County, Maryland”, 1939	3	125
“House in Baltimore County”	3	126
“The Gate house”, 1939	3	127
“The Back Lawn”	3	128
“One of the 3 Ellicott homes at Ellicott City, Maryland, 1939	3	129
“Ellicott City, Md”, 1939	3	130
“Old Mansion near Ellicott City, Maryland”	3	131
Series IX: Large format	**Box** 3	**Folder** 132-138

	Box	Folder
“St. Leo’s – Exeter and Stiles Streets – Baltimore”, no. 413	3	132
“View from Riverside Park – Baltimore”, no. 340	3	133
“Riverside Park – Baltimore”, no. 339	3	134
“Baltimore Waterfront from Riverside Park”, no. 342	3	135
“Race Track Characters” (black & white ink drawing on one Side/ watercolor on reverse), 1942	3	136
“Head of Christ”, watercolor, 1942	3	137
Reproduction of Sopher watercolor of Shot Tower and Surrounding neighborhood	3	138